

VZCZCXRO0869

PP RUEHAG RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHLZ RUEHROV

DE RUEHCV #0032 0051817

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

P 051817Z JAN 07

FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHUM SOCI VE

SUBJECT: PRISON RIOT IN LARA STATE LEAVES 16 DEAD

REF: CARACAS 25

¶1. (U) At least sixteen prisoners were killed in a riot in the early hours of January 2 at the notoriously violent Uribana prison in Lara state. Rival gangs within the prison engaged in brutal violence that left three major gang leaders among the dead, and over a dozen more inmates injured. In some cases, bodies were reportedly mutilated to the point where they could not be recognized. Prison authorities were forced to call in the National Guard; the military commander for the region, Jose Enrique Maldonado Dupuy, said the situation was under control and the next steps would include the reorganization of the entire prison and the transfer of implicated inmates to other prisons. Maldonado called those responsible "extremely violent and merciless."

¶2. (U) Heeding the words of Maldonado, over 40 prisoners deemed to be involved in the rioting were promptly transferred to four different prisons. A half dozen of these prisoners, transferred to Guanare (Portuguesa state) did not even last 24 hours in their new homes before losing their lives to presumably retribution-related murders. National press also reported five other prison riots broke out around the country on January 3, with unconfirmed rumors of additional deaths at a prison in Zulia state.

¶3. (U) Prison violence is not uncommon in Venezuela and the Uribana prison is particularly notorious. Sixty prisoners were killed in this facility in 2006. The National Assembly declared in 2004 that the national penal system was in a state of emergency, a situation that has not improved. In 2005, over 400 prisoners were killed nationwide, with another 700 injured. The NGO Venezuelan Observatory of Prisons (OVP) reported 378 prisoner deaths in 2006 through November. Inmate-on-inmate violence is disturbingly high in Venezuela, although rioting of this magnitude is rare. A January 1994 riot at Sabaneta prison in Maracaibo saw over 100 inmates killed. Inmates complaining about subpar prison conditions frequently engage in non-violent hunger strikes.

¶4. (U) Ironically, the Uribana jail is considered the most modern in the country with the most technologically-advanced security mechanisms. Humberto Prado, OVP's coordinator, lamented that even with the millions of dollars invested in Uribana, it has evolved into the most violent of the nation's prisons. Prado called on authorities to establish a coherent and effective penal program. Prado also pointed out that the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights has urged the Venezuelan government to take better control of its prisons and work to diminish prison violence. 2007 has not started well on that front.

¶5. (U) In a major national announcement on January 3, President Chavez anointed former CNE director Jorge Rodriguez as his next Vice President and current National Deputy Pedro Carreno to succeed Jesse Chacon as Minister of Interior and Justice (reftel). With regard to the dismissal of Chacon, Chavez did not offer specific reasons for his decision, but acknowledged that a general feeling of citizen insecurity and prison violence plagues the country. He cited the Uribana prison riot and mentioned that while there is a solution in the works for the "penal drama," he admits it has proceeded at a slow pace.

WHITAKER